

The Relations of Learning and Student Social Class:

Toward Re-“Socializing” Sociocultural Learning Theory

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In his theory of mind, Vygotsky proposes three forms of mediation: tools, signs and symbols (semiosis), and social interaction. Most Vygotskian sociocultural research has focused on the semiotic form of mediation to address cognitive challenges in education. Whereas semiotic mediation relies on social interaction, and social interaction has often comprised the ‘unit of analysis,’ the mediation of social interaction itself largely remains to be unpacked. Even though some studies have investigated the processes of cooperation or collaboration in learning, the dynamics of those processes as social relations have not received extensive examination in Vygotskian research. The mediation of social relations—the dynamics of power, position, social location in the social interaction of learning—is of profound significance in education. Nowhere is the importance of social relations in learning more evident than in the dynamics of social class in schooling.

Yet the dynamic of social relations has been shown to be central in the experience of failure for many low-income students, although literature on these relations has only rarely informed sociocultural studies in education. As researchers concerned with students’ learning, sociocultural theorists need to examine the matter of social relations of those we study, for these social relations are a key mediator of students’ school learning. Ideally, the perspective of sociocultural theory is able to integrate levels of analysis from the macrolevels of culture to the microlevels of social interaction and individual thinking and speech. The research to be discussed here shows that the dynamic of social relations in the social interaction of learning comprises a critical piece in understanding the articulation and integration of levels. This chapter revisits the literature on the social relations of schooling for low-income learners with an eye to ways that sociocultural theory may be informed by that work and to ways that sociocultural theory may inform the conception of low-income learners’ experience of differential social relations in schooling.

BACKGROUND: VYGOTSKY AND “CLASS”

Researchers have theorized the workings of class in education in various ways, but sociocultural theory can offer an important new dimension. What is “class” and how does it operate in learning? The sociocultural approach of Vygotsky and others opens the way to answer such questions.

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Vygotsky was influenced by a number of social theorists. In his work he refers to Durkheim, Hegel, Marx and others (see Kozulin, 1990, especially Ch. 4). In particular, Vygotsky's repeated references to Marx appear when Vygotsky's comments are particularly relevant to social or interpersonal relations. One key shared conception is the sociogenetic relation between the individual and society. In a discussion of consciousness, Vygotsky (1997b) wrote, "the social moment in consciousness is primary in time as well as in fact. The individual aspect is constructed as a derived and secondary aspect on the basis of the social aspect and exactly according to its model" (p. 77). In the following well-known quotation from Marx, which Vygotsky alludes to in his own work (e.g., 1993, p. 162), Marx emphasizes the *relational* dimension of society in the development of consciousness:

The general result at which I arrived and which, once won, served as a guiding thread for my studies, can be briefly formulated as follows: In the social production of their life, men enter into *definite relations* that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations ... correspond [to] definite *forms of social consciousness*. ... *It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary their social being that determines their consciousness.* (Tucker, 1978, p. 4; emphasis added)

Vygotsky explored the significance of social relations to the formation of consciousness in an article translated as "The socialist alteration of man" (1994). Commenting on the relationship between base and superstructure that Marx alludes to in the passage, Vygotsky wrote, "the influence of the basis on the psychological superstructure of man turns out to be not direct, but mediated by a large number of very complex material and spiritual factors. But even here, the basic law of historical human development, which proclaims that human beings are created by the society in which they live and that it represents the determining factor in the formation of their personalities, remains in force" (p. 176). Vygotsky goes on to emphasize that, "class character, class nature and class distinctions ... are responsible for the formation of human types" (1994, p. 176).

Although the connection here between class and personality may be stated too baldly, this passage is important for raising the issue of pluralism and the importance of considering class for developing a pluralistic perspective on learning and development. In his volume on Educational Psychology (1997a), Vygotsky writes that the "social environment is class-based in its very structure insofar as, obviously, all new relations are imprinted by the class basis of the environment.... Consequently, class membership defines at one fell swoop both the cultural and the natural orientation of personality in the environment" (pp. 211-212).

However, Vygotsky did not research the functioning of class in schooling, nor did he fully develop his conception of “the mediation by a large range of very complex and spiritual factors” that contribute to the formation of diverse forms of class character. He did, though, identify both the labor process and the institutional process of schooling as comprising social systems and sites that are significant in the production of personality and human psychology. This discussion aims to explore the school experience of low-income students as a site in the production of their identity as learners and to highlight ways that the interpersonal or social relations of the classroom mediate students’ learning. Despite more than twenty years of Vygotskian-inspired research in education in the United States, little consideration has been given to the school per se as a site or a social system in which class mediates the formation of the personality and psychology of the learner. But just as Marx claimed the workplace as a key site in the production of the “social being” of adults, so the school may be considered a key site in the production of the social being of the young; and the student’s social being has significant implications for her or his life as a learner. The discussion will explore the “definite relations” to which learners may be subject in schools and the implications those relations have for them as learners—and, in turn, for a Vygotskian sociocultural theory of learning. In particular, I address the issue of social class difference to examine students’ social being and consciousness as learners, asking, “What is known about the ‘relations of learning’ for students from low-income backgrounds and how do these relations mediate their learning?”

I turn, for this discussion, to key ethnographic studies of social class difference in the lived experience of learners. Cole (1996) has encouraged workers in sociocultural studies of education to combine their research with that of researchers in other disciplines to study “the institutional settings of those activities-in-context.... [F]rom a cultural-historical perspective this level of analysis is important as a site where large-scale factors such as social class articulate with individual experience” (p. 340). In particular, a number of ethnographic studies of poor and working class children in schools, elementary through high school, suggest the importance for a Vygotskian theory of learning of looking closely at issues of social relations, including power and conflict in the dynamics of institutional learning. I will use a few of these texts to illustrate the significance of these concerns for Vygotskian theory. First, however, I will clarify the ways culture and social class are used in this discussion.

FRAMEWORK FOR THE EXAMINATION OF SOCIAL CLASS IN SCHOOLING

Vygotsky wrote that “children grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (1978, p. 88). In time, Vygotsky notes, the individual’s environment undergoes change when “it expands to participation in societal production” (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 43). Children grow into the life of those around them and those life spaces are multiple and varied. Of course, between the time that children grow into the life of the family and later into the life of “societal production,” they also grow into the life of the school. As the environment expands, Vygotsky points out, the young also develop shared interests and life activity with a specific socioeconomic group: “The history of the school-age child and the youth

is the history of very intensive development and formulation of class psychology and ideology” (Ibid.).

Thus, Vygotsky noted the pluralistic nature of development and the importance of class in that variation. Leont’ev (1981), too, in discussing the concept of activity, identifies the relevance of social structures in all human activity:

If we removed human activity from the *system of social relationships and social life*, it would not exist and would have no structure. With all its varied forms, the human individual’s activity is a system in the system of social relations. It does not exist without these relations. The specific form in which it exists is determined by the forms and means of material and mental social interaction... [which depends on the individual’s] place in society” (1981, p. 47; emphasis added)

Going further, Leont’ev argues that desires, emotions, motives are all produced in and through the system of social relations, just as are cognitive processes. He writes that desire is “a factor that guides and regulates the agent’s concrete activity in the objective environment... [The formation of desires] is explained by the fact that in human society the objects of desire are produced, and the desires themselves are therefore also produced.... We can say the same thing about emotions or feelings” (1981, pp. 49-50; emphasis in original). Leont’ev’s conceptualization of the formation of desires and feelings becomes significant in attempting to understand students’ lived experience in schooling and the formation of student identities, their ways of acting or forms of agency, and their transformation over time in the cultural processes of schooling. Although Vygotsky and Leont’ev refer primarily to family and work settings as sites in the production of consciousness, the school is clearly also an important activity setting in the system of social relations.

The notions provided by Vygotsky and Leont’ev are important for providing a conception of cultural processes and their production and for alluding to the larger dynamics of power and conflict at play at the societal level. But more attention should be given to the specific ways that activity shapes psychological phenomena, especially because the workings of power and conflict in the macro-level of social life and their reflection in the micro-level of social relations are so little discussed. Ratner (2000), however, has assembled the dimensions of Vygotsky’s conceptualization of culture and added specificity in ways that can aid in the articulation of micro and macro levels of the analysis of particular examples. Ratner identifies five main kinds of cultural phenomena: cultural activities; cultural values, schemas, meanings and concepts; physical artifacts; psychological phenomena; and, agency. Because of the importance of Ratner’s formulation in the analysis to follow, I will quote his discussion of the five main kinds in full:

- a) *Cultural activities* such as producing goods, raising and educating children, making and enforcing policies and laws, providing medical care. It is through

these activities that humans survive and develop themselves. They are basic to the ways in which individuals interact with objects, people, and even oneself.

- b) *Cultural values, schemas, meanings, concepts*. People collectively endow things with meaning. Youth, old age, man, woman, bodily features, wealth, nature, and time mean different things in different societies.
- c) *Physical artifacts* such as tools, books, paper, pottery, eating utensils, clocks, clothing, buildings, furniture, toys, games, weapons and technology which are collectively constructed.
- d) *Psychological phenomena* such as emotions, perception, motivation, logical reasoning, intelligence, memory, mental illness, imagination, language, and personality are collectively constructed and distributed.
- e) *Agency*. Humans actively construct and reconstruct cultural phenomena. This “agency” is directed at constructing cultural phenomena and it is also influenced by existing cultural activities, values, artifacts, and psychology. (Ratner, 2000, p. 4)

These five kinds of phenomena are clearly interlocking and interdependent, each embodying the distinctive character of the others within itself. For example, “Agency originates in, reflects, and facilitates activities, concepts, artifacts, and psychological phenomena” (p. 4). These five dimensions give specificity to the analysis of school contexts and activities.

In addition to a conceptualization of culture, a conception of social class is necessary for this discussion. A long history of sociological study of class has produced many conceptions and divergent views of social class. Here, I take an approach offered by Pierre Bourdieu, who takes what he calls a “relational” rather than a “substantialist” or categorical approach to the conception of social class. He denies the existence of classes, in themselves, but argues that differences in social space are continually being enacted; hence “classes” are relational. Bourdieu asks, must we “accept or affirm the existence of classes? No. Social classes do not exist.... What exists is a social space, a space of differences, in which classes exist in some sense in a state of virtuality, not as something given but as *something to be done*” (1998, p. 12). Social space is an “invisible reality that cannot be shown but which organizes agents’ practices and representations” (1998, p. 10). The practices and representations organized by social class construct distance or proximity between the students and teachers and work through teacher-student interaction to differentiate students’ experiences, as will be seen later.

Bourdieu’s conception is especially well-suited to sociocultural theory because it develops a theory of action and focuses on the analysis of practices. His focus on differences that are enacted, rather than seen as static group characteristics, is particularly relevant to dynamics of class in schooling. Although his writing is dense and complex, Bourdieu states that his perspective can be “condensed in a small number of fundamental concepts—*habitus*, field, capital—and its cornerstone is the two-way relationship between objective structures (those of social fields) and incorporated structures (those of the *habitus*)” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. vii). *Social space* is conceived as a kind of field, distributing and differentiating individuals by “economic capital and cultural capital. It

follows that all agents are located in this space in such a way that the closer they are to one another in those two dimensions, the more they have in common; and the more remote they are from one another, the less they have in common” (1998, p. 6). The *habitus* represents the embodiment or incorporation of this relational structure. It is the

generative principle which retranslates the intrinsic and relational characteristics of a position [in social space] into a unitary lifestyle, that is, a unitary set of choices of persons, goods, practices.... [W]hat the worker eats, and especially the way he eats it, the sport he practices and the way he practices it.... But the essential point is that, when perceived through these social categories of perception, these principles of vision and division, the differences in practices, in the goods possessed, or in the opinions expressed become *symbolic differences and constitute a veritable language*” (1998, p. 8; underline emphasis added).

Here is the key to the analysis of school culture: the structures of differentiation and perception comprise a language that everyone reads and understands, albeit out-of-awareness. Such readings function as what Bourdieu calls a “logic of symbolic violence... according to which dominated lifestyles are almost always perceived, even by those who live them, from the destructive and reductive point of view of the dominant aesthetic” (1998, p. 9). When these structures of differentiation operate (as they culturally and historically have), they produce the sorting mechanism in schooling. The dominant lifestyle, in this way, enacts the “logic” of symbolic violence. Although *symbolic violence* may appear an exaggerated or overly dramatic term, it has real and specific meaning and is used to *denaturalize*, to specify the objectification through evaluation that differentiates opportunities (e.g., unquestioned hierarchies of high and low “ability” produced through identification of dialect or by testing). It is important to note that the cultural workings of the dominant aesthetic in schooling are largely invisible, appearing “natural,” and are not to be understood as maliciously enacted by educators. Rather, the logic of symbolic violence is part of the out-of-awareness culture that analysis seeks to make visible. As Cole has suggested, the practices we study need to be located in a larger social field than they frequently are in our relatively micro analyses of activity. Bourdieu’s concepts of field, *habitus* and capital can help to do that, in conjunction with a conception of culture that seeks the unification of material, ideal, practice, subjectivity and agency.

ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDIES OF SOCIAL CLASS DIFFERENCE IN SCHOOLS

Numerous studies by ethnographic researchers have focused on the issue of social class as a factor in schools and classrooms, and many of these are of significance here. Examples can be cited addressing all ages of learner populations, from pre-school through college, addressing the full range of school settings, urban, suburban and rural, considering all regions of the United States as well as other countries, and covering numerous subgroups across a range of ethnic, cultural and racial identities. Rather than attempting to survey this literature, I choose to examine a few key studies in depth. The studies chosen here present important, revealing work, but the findings of each can be

explicated in greater depth through application of the theories just summarized. Furthermore, applying these theories to a few classic studies illustrates how sociocultural theory can be articulated with sociological and anthropological studies of the workings of social class in schooling.

I will begin with the consideration of two studies that examine children in the earliest years of public schooling. One study examines social class in a school where all students and adult personnel were Black; the other study compares classrooms in two schools in a community that was essentially all White. The similarity in findings across the two studies helps to clarify the relevance of social class difference in schooling. The first study to be considered was conducted by Ray Rist. Although Rist conducted the study more than thirty years ago, its influence has been long-lived, and in 2000 the article was re-published in Harvard Education Review as a “classic” for its ongoing relevance. The site of Rist’s study was an “urban ghetto school” in which “all administrators, teachers, staff, and pupils [were] black” (1970/2000, p. 271) and more than half of the students came from families receiving economic assistance. The study site and teachers were considered “as good as any in the city” (p. 271). Significantly, Rist found that class distinction was widely reflected in the adults’ treatment of the students.

Rist identifies a profound pattern that was established before the end of the second week of Kindergarten and appeared to define children’s schooling from that time forward. On the eighth day of Kindergarten, the teacher placed the children into three reading groups that she regarded as reflecting ability. The placement was based on no testing, as none had been done. In attempting to account for the way the placements were made, Rist identifies all sources of information available to the teacher. Before the beginning of school, the teacher had information about each child from parental registration forms (such as whether the child had attended preschool), from the social worker (whether the family received assistance, as did 55% of the school population), and from other teachers (such as whether an older sibling was ‘a trouble-maker’). Once school began, the teacher appeared to begin favoring children who were dressed in newer and cleaner clothing and spoke in a dialect similar to standard. Even sooner than the children were placed in three groups of high, middle and low ability, Rist noticed that a favored group had emerged—those the teacher called on to lead activities and to answer questions and who later all appeared in the high group. This is the logic of symbolic violence that Bourdieu refers to, reflecting the workings of the social space and the remoteness and proximity of agents, and revealing the way an economic hierarchy of social relations is enacted in the classroom. The identifiable commonalities in the high group were material and class-identified: The children were dressed in newer, cleaner clothing and their dialect of English more closely approximated the middle class standard.

Over time, Rist found multiple levels on which the symbolic violence was manifested in line with the teacher’s structuring of the three ranked groups and produced an economy in the class that represented a robust hierarchy of privilege within the classroom. The teacher gives her time and attention to the Table 1 “high group” students and all but ignores students at Tables 2 and 3 during instruction. When the teacher does

direct her attention to Tables 2 and 3, she delivers negative messages to the students; Table 1 never receives negative messages. Both the high and lower group students internalize the norms of value and privilege by treating each other according to a shared set of values: Table 1 high group students mistreat the Table 2 and 3 students, both physically and verbally. The Table 2 and Table 3 students also mistreat each other—but never the Table 1 students.

Rist accounts for the teacher's behavior in terms of a "normative reference group," by which she would identify individual students having characteristics she associates with being most like her own academically successful middle-class group, and least similar to those of the less privileged students. Bourdieu's notions of social field, *habitus* and capital can give more specificity to the finding: The teacher appears to favor students who are located similarly to her in the social field, displaying a *habitus* that reflects similar cultural and economic capital. The student *habitus* includes "coming from a family that is educated [through high school], employed, living together... demonstrating ease of interaction among adults; high degree of verbalization in Standard American English; the ability to become a leader; a neat and clean appearance... and the ability to participate well as a member of a group" (Rist, 1970/2000, p. 276). Rist finds similar patterns of social relations between the teacher and students and between groupings of children when he follows the children into grades 2 and 3. In particular, he finds increasing disaffection from classroom activity among the Table 2 and 3 students, manifested either as 'acting out' through verbal and behavioral resistance to school work or as apathy in the form of work not done.

Viewing Rist's findings through the lens of Ratner's (2000) five dimensions of culture highlights the potential formation of differential *habitus* in the experience of schooling itself. Rist's findings suggest that the lower group children's lived experience of schooling differs substantially from that of those in the privileged group in terms of all five dimensions of culture identified by Ratner: (a) teachers engage the high group children in more significant *cultural activities* and these activities offer greater opportunities for academic learning; (b) teachers endow the groups with different *values* through use of verbal and non-verbal messages so that subgroup identities of high and low social value are assigned; (c) lesser value is linked to *physical conditions* of tables and locations, as the lower-group tables are more distant from the teacher and the chalkboard, out of view of both, and more crowded; (d) the emotional and motivational experiences of rejection vs. desirability construct differential classroom *psychologies*; (e) the different groups appear to reflect differential constructions of *agency*, as the privileged children conform to teacher and school values, whereas the stigmatized lower-group children enact either active or passive resistance in the forms of either oppositional behavior or disengagement. Over time, the development of increasingly different "durable dispositions" or *habitus* seems quite likely, with the possibility of diminished opportunities for some and diminished humanity for all.¹

The point here, then, is not simply to revisit the literature on the effect of differential teacher expectations. Rather, this discussion seeks to explain the schooling of low-income children as a *cultural activity* with distinctive *social relations* because the

character of such activity and of such relations is central to the development of children as learners, the development of their learners' *habitus* and school identity which can powerfully mediate children's learning. If so, these dimensions are essential in the construction of a sociocultural theory of learning.

A second important study of social class as a factor in early schooling was conducted by Kathleen Wilcox (1988). Unlike Rist, Wilcox studied classrooms in two schools for one year in a controlled comparison design. She, too, used ethnographic observation, here in two first grade classrooms in the same district, one in an upper middle class (UMC) neighborhood school, the other in a lower middle class (LMC) one. Both the teachers and almost all the children were white. Wilcox's findings are very similar to Rist's (with African-American teachers and children), and there are no discrepant findings between the two studies. Wilcox, however, uncovers further dimensions of differential expectations and treatment. Recall that Rist found more controlling behavior directed toward children from less privileged backgrounds. Relatedly, Wilcox found qualitative differences in the ways teachers verbally controlled higher (UMC) and lower (LMC) status children. She identified "external control" language and "internal control" language. In *external control*, the teacher simply directed the child or children, for example, "I want that done now" or "You have an assignment; sit down and get busy" (Wilcox, 1988, p. 288). In *internal control* language, the teacher emphasized the children's internalizing of responsibility, as in "Will this misbehavior help you to become a better reader?" or "Be fair to yourself; use your time wisely to help you become a better reader" (Wilcox, 1988, p. 290). Wilcox found striking differences in the distribution of the teachers' uses of internal and external strategies and messages of control:

UMC classroom	39% internal strategies	59% internal messages
LMC classroom	9% internal strategies	10% internal messages

In order to determine whether such differences simply reflected individual teacher variation, Wilcox also separated each class into the top and bottom half of readers, with the following result: "Children in the top half of the reading groups in both classrooms received significantly more internal messages than children in the bottom half of the reading groups in the two classrooms ($p = .005$). They also received significantly more internal academic messages ($p = .046$). Thus, an internal approach, particularly with respect to academic interactions, is associated in both classrooms with children who are perceived to have the highest ability level and future potential" (pp. 290-291).

In addition, Wilcox found that the higher status children were given many more opportunities to develop what she calls "self-presentation skills" such as speaking and presenting before the group and that they received considerable guidance in and praise for doing so. The higher status children were also given considerable focus on the future, "what you will become and therefore need to prepare for." The teacher of the higher status children voiced her expectations about their futures eight times more frequently and emphasized going to college, whereas the teacher of the lower status children was never observed referring to college. Of the teacher of the LMC children, Wilcox writes,

“The most remarkable characteristic of Mrs. Jones’ approach to the future of the children in her classroom was that she virtually ignored it” (p. 295).

Wilcox gives considerable attention to trying to place the pattern of identified differences into the larger sociocultural context in order to account for her troubling findings. She finds no evidence that the differential forms of treatment occurred *in response* to ways children acted; on the contrary, they were *initiated by school personnel*. Wilcox writes, “Interviews with teachers themselves made it clear that they felt they were allowing and encouraging each child to develop and progress as far as each was able; they would have been shocked at any accusation of differential treatment based on social class” (p. 295).

What Wilcox finds is a *disconnect* between general commitments to equality and specific beliefs about the families and home lives of the children in the schools at the level of the school staff, the district staff and the state educational apparatus. At the level of the school, she concludes that the “social class level of the neighborhood was a very salient characteristic in the minds of the staff at both schools. It generated general levels of expectations for children in each neighborhood which could be seen to influence the behavior of the teachers in the classroom” (Wilcox, 1988, p. 298). These differences appeared to have “strikingly different consequences in terms of the staff’s reaction to individual learning problems on the part of individual children” (Ibid.). A UMC child having a learning problem, for example, would receive multiple forms of assistance until the problem was solved, whereas an LMC child would receive no assistance because the problem was seen as “to-be-expected.”

Wilcox’s findings at the district and state levels reflected analogous patterns of differential expectations associated with social class.² Wilcox concludes, “Most significant is the fact that all of the factors used to determine the level of expectations are factors *outside* the classroom walls. The implication is, unavoidably, that what is really important in terms of achievement are the characteristics a child brings from home rather than what takes place at school” (pp. 299-300). Ultimately, however, Wilcox does not indict the individual personnel at all levels of the educational system, but instead suggests that “the educational personnel observed in this study behaved no differently than one could expect any cultural beings to behave in the situation” (Wilcox, 1988, p. 302).

Wilcox’s conclusion presents a significant challenge to educational innovation aimed only at the level of learning and instruction: “The research findings suggest that many popular educational reforms are likely simply to rearrange the appearance of classroom interaction, leaving the substance of what takes place in the classroom largely untouched. This is because the reforms are conceptualized and introduced with little understanding of the powerful cultural influences at work in the classroom” (Wilcox, 1988, p. 303).

Employing Ratner’s five dimensions again, as with Rist’s study, there are significant ways that Wilcox’s findings add to conceptualizing the cultural production of student *habitus*. The differential focus on internal strategies and differential frequency of

internal messages constitute specific cultural activities and cultural values (a and b); these, in turn, contribute to differentiation in psychology, particularly motivation (d) and produce significant differences in students' sense of agency (e). Similarly, the differential access to the activity of self-presentation (a) contributes to differential development of language, memory and related cognitive processes (d), as well as to sense of agency (e).

The final investigation of first grade classrooms to be discussed expands the significance of differential relations to specific curricular content. James Collins (1986) investigated the ways in which patterns of differential treatment such as those identified by Rist and Wilcox become translated into differential instruction in reading groups. Collins examined first grade reading lessons in high and low groups of the same class, conducted by both a senior teacher and a regular teacher's aide, across the school year. The class was divided into four reading groups considered low (1), mid (2), high (3) and extra high (4); Collins compared groups 1 and 3, the low and the high groups. "High-group readers were from white professional families, low-group readers from Black working-class families" (Collins, 1986, p. 122). Referring to the contrast between the groups, Collins writes, "Since the two groups were homogeneous with regard to ethnic group and social class membership... we could expect maximal contrasts in community-based speech styles and in such things as implicit teacher expectations" (Ibid).

Collins's findings follow a pattern that is similar to those identified by Rist and Wilcox. He summarizes his findings as follows:

Comparison of the groups revealed a two-tiered structure of differential treatment. On one level, the more general one of amounts of time spent at the various types of instructional activities, low-group readers were given extensive sound-word identification drill, with little attention paid to the meaningfulness of the reading task, while their high-group counterparts were given much more practice in passage reading and the answering of questions about the material being read. On the other level, that of specific instructional procedures, correction of oral reading errors for low-group readers focused on grapheme-phoneme correspondences and word recognition, while corrections for the high group readers focused more on the semantics and pragmatics of text comprehension—in short on meaning. (Collins, 1986, pp. 122-123)

Collins develops a more fine-grained analysis of transcribed lessons of the small groups than can be fully presented here. Of particular significance for this discussion is that the interactional process of teacher-student exchanges in the small groups leads to two differing conceptions of what counts as reading being learned by the two groups of students. By examining features such as pauses, points of interruption, and intonation, Collins shows that the *teachers respond differently to equivalent errors in the two groups*: "Numerous examples taken from the entire corpus of sixteen lessons had shown that identical miscues prompted either decoding-focused or comprehension-focused corrections" (Collins, 1986, p. 129). That is, teachers' responses differ not necessarily because children have different skills; rather, they differ even when the children in the different groups make the same miscues. This finding clarifies another dimension of the

workings of social space as it “organizes agents’ practices,” as suggested by Bourdieu. The same academic “mistake” is interpreted differently, depending on the relative positioning in social space; the act of the more spatially distanced is interpreted as less meaningful and less skillful. Such findings raise the question of whether the same “correct” answer also may be interpreted differentially, depending on social location.

As with the Rist and Wilcox findings, Collins’s study also suggests differentiation in the several dimensions of culture specified in Ratner’s model: differentiated instructional *activity* (a) constitutes differential ways of reading as a linguistic and cognitive *psychological process* (d); the specific content difference of a mechanical vs. a meaningful task also carries implications for differing *values and meanings* students learn to give to reading (b), as well as for differential constructions of *motivations and feelings* about reading (also d), and sense of *agency* in relation to reading (e).

Like Wilcox, Collins (1986) is careful to note that his analysis,

should not be construed as a condemnation of individual teachers, however. When we study conversational interaction in multi-ethnic situations we are looking for the effects of unconscious habits of organizing talk (prosodically, lexically, syntactically) on the unfolding interaction. But a participant, as an actor present in the situation, either as a teacher or student, cannot be expected to employ the analyst’s detached perspective. Instead, he or she is busy in the process of assessing and responding to another’s contributions” (p. 129).

The reference to “unconscious habits” that Collins offers recalls Bourdieu’s assertions about the functioning of social fields. Teachers’ socially constituted perceptions of students who are positioned most distant from them enact the logic of symbolic violence because the students are given lesser opportunities to learn through differential and differentiating instruction, as well as differential and differentiating interaction.

Overall, the studies of Collins, Wilcox and Rist all suggest that the process of differential expectations and differential treatment of low-income learners is both out-of-awareness of educational personnel in all dimensions that the researchers observed and, at the same time, integral to the cultural processes of schooling in U.S. society.³ The findings of the three studies strongly suggest that differential treatment in the process of schooling itself is of central importance in the development of a learner’s sense of identity and agency. If one accepts that a child does not begin formal schooling with a “student *habitus*” fully formed, then it is important to recognize that schooling is not a “null space” in the production of the child’s sense of herself/himself as a learner and her/his sense of what the practices and processes of schooling are about. Teachers and other educational personnel at all levels go to work with their own social and cultural dispositions, their *habitus* highly developed over years of lived experience in a stratified and stratifying society. Considerable reflection is required to denaturalize resulting subjectivities so that they might be transformed and that the relations of learning for low-income students could be transformed, in turn.

DISCUSSION

The three studies reviewed all examined the earliest school experiences of low-income learners. How might the lived experiences of the students in these studies be extrapolated over the long span of twelve years of schooling? Vygotsky's general law of cultural development offers a way to approach this question:

Any function in the child's cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category.... [I]t goes without saying that internalization transforms the process itself and changes its structure and functions. Social relations or relations among people genetically underlie all higher functions and their relationships. (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 163).

The three studies help to suggest how children's "cultural development" is differentiated in the processes of schooling. Similarly, Bourdieu's concept of the *habitus* complements Vygotsky's notion. The *habitus* is that "system of lasting ... dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions*" (1977, p. 82). It is "history made nature" (1977, p. 78). The *habitus* is "embodied history, internalized as second nature and so forgotten as history... *the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product*" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 56, emphasis added). Vygotsky and Bourdieu are explaining the same phenomenon on their respective levels of focus, the psychological and the sociological. Thus, for example, Collins finds a low and high group reader making the same oral reading error, but one is corrected with decoding facts and the other is corrected with a meaning-making strategy. For the former, reading is experienced as an activity of making sound-symbol correspondences, for the latter it is an activity of making meaning from printed text. Studies of adolescents who are non-readers or poor readers bear out the suggestion that their reading instruction was not focused on meaning-making and they have not known reading as a meaningful and engaging activity (e.g., see Mueller, 2001).

If students' experiences are consistently patterned as the studies of Rist, Wilcox and Collins suggest, consider how school history might become second nature. How might students' differential "interpsychological" experiences construct differential "intrapsychological" student *habitus* and identity? Referring once again to Ratner's (2000) cultural dimensions, the ongoing *cultural activity* (a) of schooling is a lived experience of significant failure and rejection for some, but one of success and affirmation for others. For some children, schooling and literacy come to be endowed with positive and desirable *meanings and values* (b), whereas for others they are endowed with negative and aversive meanings and values or at least boring and meaningless activities. Some children in school have access to valued *artifacts* (c) such as the "high table" and the "high books" and others receive less valued artifacts and placements. For some children, the lived experience of schooling constructs *psychological phenomena* (d) of negative emotions and motivations toward school and restricts access to experiences

that can promote the development of language, memory, logical reasoning and intelligence; conversely, for others schooling is an activity that promotes the production and distribution of positive phenomena and highly developed cognitive processes. Finally, some children develop a strong and positive sense of *agency* (e) in school activity, whereas others either see themselves as weak and incapable learning agents or manifest agency in the form of rejection of school activity, whether actively as oppositional behavior or passively as disinterest. The suggestion, then, is that student-teacher relations of learning that diverge widely in terms of meanings, values, activities, artifacts, agency and feelings contribute to the production of divergent student identities.

What might be imagined for the students such as those in the studies of Rist, Wilcox and Collins when they get to high school? What kind of school participation might be expected after eight years of unrewarding school relations? Many studies of low-income students in secondary schools bear out the hypothesis of a “school-rejecting” student identity (e.g., Everhart, 1983; McLeod, 1987; Weis, 1990). In a study of working-class high school students, Weis (1990), found commonalities across studies of low-income secondary students. In particular, there is “the often overt and sometimes covert rejection of school meanings and culture. There is an attempt on the part of working-class youth to carve out their own space within the institution—space that can then be filled with their own meanings which are fundamentally antischool” (Weis, 1990, p. 18). Ironically, Weis found that de-industrialization and the attendant loss of high-paying jobs had led students to aspire to higher education. But, contradicting their explicit aspirations, students’ actions belied negative valuations of academic learning and dispositions. Students have learned to view schooling merely as work to be completed, which then translates as “a ticket” to a better job. As students who have effectively been “outsiders” to educational success, they do not see any substantive value in the schooling itself. In this understanding, “passing” one’s courses is thought to be enough to get on to higher education; but of course such a view leads to later failure when they go to college. Not surprisingly, working-class students do not have access to the cultural knowledge—in Bourdieu’s language, the “cultural capital”—to understand how higher education actually “works.”

An interpretation of Weis’s finding is that the school identity produced through years of subordinate experience is not easily transformed to support late-adopted aspirations. A long history produces a deep-seated “second nature” requiring substantially different social relations to achieve transformation: A new intrapsychological process can best be produced through a different interpsychological process. Such transformation is difficult and unlikely, though not impossible (e.g., see Rose, 1989). Some authors, however, identify family and community as sources of the kinds of commonalities identified by Weis and others, reflecting a “shop-floor mentality” available in working-class families and communities. Although such sources of influence cannot be discounted, compelling counter-evidence comes from studies of low-track classes in highly affluent high schools, where non-working class students presented the same resistant, subordinated school identity. For example, Page (1987) studied “unofficially low-tracked” classes in a “dream high school.” The students in the classes studied by Page were overwhelmingly middle class and upper middle class and did not

evidence working-class identifications. However, these students received differentially less-valued curricula and instruction, which the students themselves frequently referred to as “baby work.” Like the low-income secondary students studied by Weis and others, the students in Page’s study had become similarly school-rejecting agents, practicing absenteeism, tardiness, and classroom behavior characterized alternately by misbehavior or sullen withdrawal. Page’s contrasting student sample adds weight to the argument that school itself is a significant source of the student *habitus*.

The point is that at a high status school, just as at a working class school, a social space constructs teachers as distanced from the low-track group, who it happens, receive a less valued curriculum and less-purposeful relations with teachers. In Page’s words, “teachers distance themselves from the lower-track [teaching] role, mocking themselves, the students and the educational enterprise in which they are jointly engaged” (p. 450). In the end, “encounters in the [lower track] classes become caricatures of the excellent education provided the college-bound” (p. 472).

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIOCULTURAL LEARNING THEORY

The intentions of this discussion have been to construct an understanding of the experience of schooling of low-income students in terms of interpersonal relations that mediate their learning and their experience of schooling and to set the conception of the relations of learning in the larger context of culture and society. The discussion points to a need in sociocultural theory for an expanded definition of culture, such as Ratner’s, and for an articulated theory of social space, such as Bourdieu’s, to account for the dynamics of conflict and power in learning and development. The differential experiences of schooling reflect larger conflicts in society and constitute a form of symbolic violence suffered by low-income learners. It is not surprising that over time students who share the experience of being “losers” in this conflict, and the objects of symbolic violence in Bourdieu’s sense, may develop opposition to school. If “social being determines consciousness,” it is not surprising that negative interpersonal relations in schooling are connected to rejection of the meanings of school. Vygotsky recognized this when he wrote that the negativism of the adolescent “arises mainly as a reaction to a rejecting effect of the environment... [such as] oppressive effects of the school situation” (1998, p. 22). It is important to underscore that the rejection of the meanings of school is a collective act, not an individual one per se, corresponding to the shared experience of rejection. Rather than the deviant act of separate individuals, school rejection is the collective act of students who share institutional histories. Vygotsky has also commented on the development of collective psychology: “[W]e must present class psychology not as suddenly arising, but as gradually developing.... The history of the school-age child and the youth is the history of very intensive development and formulation of class psychology and ideology.... Class cohesion is formed as a result not of external imitation, but by shared life, activity, and interests” (1998, p. 43). The studies reviewed show that the school is a significant context in which students may collectively have a “shared life, activity, and interests.”

Sociocultural learning theory has explored deeply the role of signs and symbols in mediation, but must more fully consider the ways that interpersonal relations mediate students' school lives and the consequences of these social relations for learning. The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is a notion from Vygotsky's work that has been widely referenced in contemporary educational theory and practice. But discussions and applications of the ZPD have not taken up the qualitative or differential aspects of interpersonal relations. Kris Gutierrez and her colleagues (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez and Tejeda, 1995) indirectly address social relations in their use of the "third space" as a way of conceptualizing the achievement of real dialogue between students and teacher in a classroom that is almost exclusively monologic. Gutierrez and associates point out that real change for disenfranchised students requires more than merely new methods of instruction; the nature of relations between teachers and learners must change. Similarly, Alan Davis and colleagues (Davis, 1996; Clarke, Davis, Rhodes and Baker, 1996) have studied classrooms where low-income learners are successful. These are classrooms where low-income students who elsewhere would be labeled as having "low ability" are succeeding. The researchers find no particular teaching method or approach (such as "whole language" or "phonics") to be common to the successful classrooms. Instead, they find each classroom to have "a highly coherent and inclusive social system.... What is 'culturally compatible' about the classrooms we have studied is not their underlying values or the nature of activities in which students engage, but rather the development of relationships in which each person is valued and able to participate successfully" (pp. 25-26). It is not simply that teachers are "nice" to students in these classrooms: students are respected and expected to learn highly valued curricula and to engage in critical thinking. But opportunity for meaningful teacher-student *relationship* is precisely the characteristic that *mediates* access to academically demanding content and has been missing from classrooms examined in this discussion. There are two important questions related to the zone of proximal development here. First, what does the teacher take the student's ZPD to be? The answer here will depend on whether the teacher perceives the student to be able or not-able and whether the teacher perceives the student to be open to learning or resistant to learning; a perception of able and open seems more likely to gauge the location of the student's ZPD appropriately. Second, what does the student take to be the teacher's intentions relative to his/her learning? The student who experiences a respectful and trusting relationship with the teacher will be more likely to want to learn from the teacher and, thus, to engage in his/her ZPD. Thus, the likelihood of a teacher and a student to "enter" a student's "zone" seems contingent on their relations. (Of course, productive relations may also be relative to a student's cumulative prior school experiences, for a student who has lived through many years of degrading relations of learning, for example, may be "hard to reach" and require a considerable relational skill of a teacher. Sociocultural learning theory needs to address such challenges.)

In many studies that involve ZPD, the relations of learning are not problematic. For example, in studies of parent-children interaction, the parents finely tune their interaction to the needs of the child, and they are highly attentive and sensitized to those needs. However, when interaction moves from the intimate and private familial setting to the formal setting of public school, the relations of learning are different and require additional attention and theory. The dynamics of the social relations between teachers

and students should be examined in fine-grained ways to understand the ways those relations mediate students' learning. Case studies of teachers who work successfully with low-income learners offer an important way to study the ways social relations mediate learning. It will be important to observe the ongoing interactions of those teachers and students, as well as to gather accounts of the teachers whose social relations with low-income learners establish productive learning environments, and to gather accounts of the learners themselves.

FINAL WORD

Although social groups have long been the subject of Vygotskian-inspired research, as in Luria's early study of urban, rural and homeless children (Luria, 1978), there has been little work on low-income learners as a social group *within* the activity context of the school, particularly with the school understood as a social field in which social relations mediate learning. As Dewey (e.g., 1900) began urging over a century ago, educators must take more account of the social dimension in schooling, and a place to focus is on the social relations between students and teachers. Similarly, feminists and many social scientists have criticized the absence of social considerations in numerous domains of study (e.g., Geertz, 1983; Martin, 1992, 1994; Sampson, 1989, 1993). Although Vygotskian inspired approaches aim to situate the individual in social, cultural and historical context, I suggest that sociocultural approaches to learning give greater consideration also to the social conception of the learner and to the relations of learning if a fully adequate theory of learning is to be constructed for education.

Notes

1 In case the result of differential ways of acting may be thought to simply reflect differences in ability, Rist offers some telling details from visits to low group students' homes: he discovers that children have actually learned material from classroom instruction that their classroom performance either does not display or they are not given the opportunity to display. This information tends to belie an interpretation of ability difference and, even, to suggest the opposite: despite being ignored during instruction, the low group students were learning material that was being taught quite directly to others, but not to them.

2 At the district level, the test scores of the UMC school were readily given out and shown off, while scores for the LMC school were withheld and the researchers were told that "the schools' achievement scores could not be given out" (Wilcox, 1988, p. 298), necessitating extensive negotiation between the researchers and the district. Wilcox writes that officials gave the explanation that scores were not given out because parents complained about them. She adds that, "A high-level district official said with considerable indignation that the parents simply did not understand that the scores were *a direct consequence of the average IQ and socioeconomic level of the neighborhood*" (Wilcox, 1988, pp. 298-299; emphasis in original). A similar attitude was reflected at the state level in the construction of a statistic that computed "an expected test score range for each district and for each school within the state" based on socioeconomic status and related factors (such as pupil mobility rate and percentage of bilingualism).

3 Of course, there are many educators, both teachers and administrators, who are aware of such cultural processes and successfully resist them. The reality, however, is that they remain in the minority and that differential expectations for low-income and minority learners remains a major challenge if education is ever to achieve the ideal of equal opportunity and social justice.

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